

## Stop Tobacco Circus

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Article

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ON Tuesday, May 31, we will be celebrating the 2005 World No-Tobacco Day (WNTD), a day to look back and check the Key Performance Indices (KPIs) in our attempt to butt out the deadly smoking habit in Malaysia over the last year.

It is also a day of stern reminder for smokers to quit their dangerous habit.

Increasingly, WNTD has become more important for Asia, being the last frontier for the tobacco industry, which has been booting out of their (Western) countries of origin.

A recent global report suggests that cigarette production per person has fallen to its lowest level since 1972, which makes the tobacco industry desperate for new markets.

Asia, already the region with the largest number of smokers, is a convenient target since the level of awareness of its population is generally low.

In addition, the commitment of Asian policymakers is wavering, giving tobacco companies the much needed room to manoeuvre and lobby.

In Malaysia, the tobacco companies are very active and well-supported if the level of profits reaped year after year is anything to go by.

In fact, they are emboldened to hold a major conference in Kuala Lumpur by the end of the year, which speaks volumes of Malaysian policymakers' stand on tobacco-related events.

This is despite the numerous policies and campaigns held — many of which a half-baked and poorly executed — and this gives the industry a clear room to carry out business as usual.

The latest toll is the "Tak Nak" campaign, which, according to the Ministry, is not effective, although there are reports and segments of society that felt otherwise.

So too the nationwide "Quit Smoking" programme which reportedly drew poor response.

If this is the case, it is regrettable that so much time, effort and money have been wasted.

Strange though no one is counting the number of lives lost during the same period.

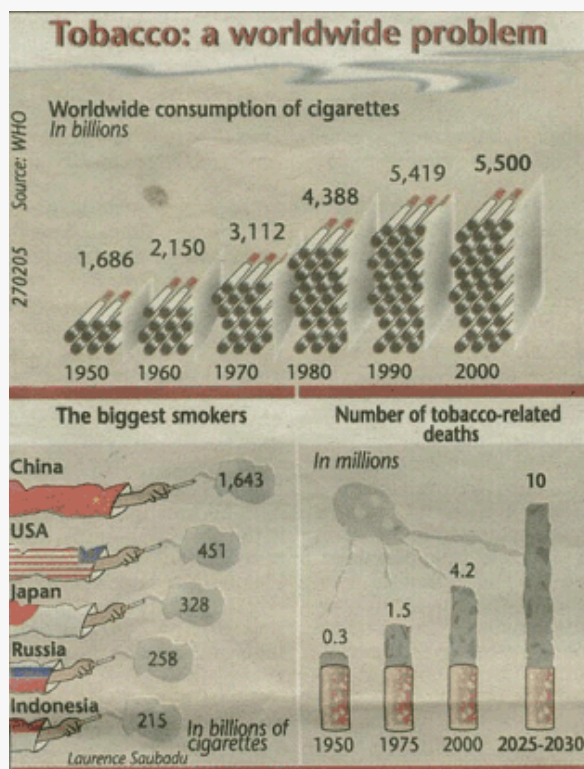
As usual human cost due to smoking is the last on everyone's mind.

Added to these are a number of "confusing" statements issued recently.

The first was from the president of the newly set-up Malaysian Council for Tobacco Control (MCTC), who said "our council will fight the smoking scourge without directly confronting tobacco industry players".

The president reportedly said this during a conference ambitiously themed "Towards a Smoke Free Malaysia", raising doubts whether this can ever be achieved without "confronting" the source of the problem — the tobacco industry.

More so, knowing full well how deceitful the industry has been and still is as evident from many internal documents now made public.



The MCTC might not be aware that it is dealing with professional peddlers of death, and ruthless ones at that.

It is thus naive to dismiss the historic landmark that brought the tobacco industry to its knees when enlightened governments of powerful nations launched multi-million lawsuits just a few years ago.

And as it turned out, practically all of the lawsuits were every bit confrontational in nature.

The memory of the council needs to be jolted to the fact that for at least three decades, it was the industry that set the ground rules of the game.

The game included cover-ups, deception and lies, as the lawsuits revealed.

Surely a national body like MCTC cannot forget these important lessons, unless it doubles up for the other MCTC, the Malaysian Confederation of Tobacco Companies.

So, what makes the MCTC leadership (if one can call it that) think that its "gentlemanly" approach will make any impact when powerful nations are compelled to act to the contrary?

Or are they here to add to the number of "failed, well-intentioned" efforts encountered so far?

Then there was the statement by the Ministry of Health's Parliamentary Secretary last week advocating "a balanced perspective" in favour of an international tobacco expo to be held in Malaysia in November.

This is yet another cop out that followed so soon after the ministry agreed to postpone the ban on the sales of small packets, thanks to the efforts of the tobacco lobby.

To quote the Parliamentary Secretary, "Even though the consequences are bad, they can come over here if they want to as Malaysia is a free trading nation."

How preposterous! This means there is now no stopping the tobacco industry to freely affect the lives of Malaysians with their toxic produce.

Given this background, it was news when the Minister of Health criticised the tobacco industry for getting around anti-smoking laws and still market cigarettes to the young (NST, May 20).

The "free trading nation" standards advocated by his Parliamentary Secretary renders it meaningless to quote statistics such as one in every four Malaysians under 20 years of age is a smoker.

So too the finding from the Global Youth Survey (2003) that more than a quarter of Malaysian youths smoke.

Or the fact that some 10,000 Malaysians die annually from smoking-related causes. In short, who cares, after all this is a "free trading" nation, right?

Next, the Minister lamented that "top people in advertising, lobbying and public relations allow tobacco companies to aggressively market cigarettes."

But is this not what a "free trading" nation is all about? Still what was glaringly left unsaid was the fact that "top" people in the government sector, including those retired, are also seemingly working hand in glove with the industry.

They range from those who serve on the management board of tobacco companies, to decision makers, to those who are severely addicted to tobacco products.

All in all, directly or indirectly, they contribute to the industry's well being.

Yes, the Minister acknowledges that the tobacco companies "use every means at their disposal to promote smoking and block effective tobacco reduction measures, including years of systematic lying, obfuscation and denial about addiction and passive smoking".

But he must also acknowledge the help the tobacco industry gets from the government sector, especially his very own Ministry.

The people who help the tobacco industry act and sound more like shareholders or employees must be singled out.

They cannot be allowed to undermine the Government's anti-smoking campaign.

The flip-flop policies are like the antics of clowns, only it is no laughing matter when it comes to the health of the nation.

We must work with the Prime Minister and confront the tobacco vultures to save lives and improve the quality of life.

Aptly, the theme of WNTD this year is "Health Professionals Against Tobacco: Actions and Answers", which reminds us that we need to be acutely professional if tobacco use is to be controlled.

But this does not mean other professionals, be they from the civil, legal, enforcement, educational or religious services, cannot join together to fight the scourge.

But first the tobacco circus must stop. Enough is enough.

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